

Testimony
Submitted to the
Education Committee

March 7, 2011

H.B. 6502

To Representative Fleischmann, Senator Stillman, and members of the Appropriations Committee.

My name is Leslee Hill, and I am a member of the Canton Board of Education. I serve as Canton's representative to the Capital Region Education Council (CREC), and as Canton's liaison to the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE). Please accept this testimony in reference to H.B. 6502, An Act Concerning the Open Choice Program.

The Canton Board of Education supports the Open Choice funding formula set forth in in Sec. 3(g)(2) of H.B. 6502, which provides:

- \$3,000 per student for districts allocating less than 2% or more of their total enrollment to Open Choice students;
- \$4,000 per student for districts allocating 2% or more; and
- \$6,000 per student for districts allocating 3% or more.

Increasing the per pupil funding rate from \$2,500 to a maximum of \$6,000 is essential to meet the Open Choice participation benchmarks agreed upon by the State of Connecticut for the implementation of the *Sheff* Comprehensive Management Plan. This funding level must be met prior to any other actions being taken, including funding the development of new magnet schools.

Canton has proactively sought to fulfill the remedies proscribed by the court in the *Sheff* Comprehensive Management Plan. Despite having limited capacity within our buildings, particularly at our K-3 elementary school, and facing a growing student population, Canton has increased its Open Choice participation every year. Currently, Canton welcomes 53 Open Choice students into its schools, which equates to 3% of the student population and ranks 6th in participation of the 35 capital area districts. Moreover, Canton has worked diligently to fulfill the spirit of the court's ruling and the Management Plan. For example, Canton has instituted a host family program to welcome our new students and their families as valued members of the Canton schools community. Canton has also sought out siblings of current Open Choice students, in order to provide entire families with the opportunity for a Canton schools education. In September, Canton launched a pilot full-day kindergarten class for its Open Choice kindergarteners. This program not only allows one class of Hartford and Canton kindergarteners to learn together for a full day, it also engages the families of the students in social and educational activities outside of the school day. We hope to continue with this level of commitment, but only adequate funding will enable us to do so.

It costs approximately \$13,500 in state and local dollars to educate a magnet school student versus \$6,000 per pupil for Open Choice placement; therefore, two students can be educated in Open Choice settings at the same cost of educating a single magnet school student. Canton fully supports CREC in its commitment to forgo the opening of any new magnet schools in order to reallocate funds to Open Choice programs. Instead of districts sending magnet school tuitions to the state, the state will send Open Choice funding to school districts. This is the most financially responsible manner with which to ensure long-term success and sustainability of the Open Choice Program.

The Canton Board of Education believes in equal access to high quality education for all of Connecticut's children. However, in these difficult economic times, we must seek the cost effective solution that is proven to work. The Open Choice program is working, but it cannot continue without adequate funding to encourage increased participation by the suburban districts. Canton has demonstrated its commitment to providing a high quality, integrated education for our children, but it is critical that you consider the financial burdens faced by Canton and all school districts, while we voluntarily embrace higher percentages of Open Choice students.

We would welcome your visit to our schools to see first hand how Open Choice is working in Canton. Thank you for your consideration and support.

Leslee B. Hill
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Canton Board of Education